

Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective

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Abstract

The article presents a critical analysis of the theories and practices of scientific objectivity and outlines a promising feminist concept of objectivity. The author begins by criticizing two mainstream approaches to a feminist evaluation of scientific objectivity: a social constructionism combining the techniques of semiology and deconstruction, and a feminist empiricism. The former insists on the rhetorical nature of truth existing in the power field of a textualized world, while the latter legitimizes scientific objectivity adjusted for the results of gender analysis to yield a “successor science.” Rehabilitating the metaphor of vision resolves the dichotomy between the historical contingency of knowledge claims and subjects and the trust in scientific explanations of the “real” world. Any vision is embodied and therefore presupposes a location in the world. Consequently, the objectivity sought is inevitably embodied, and knowledge is situated and local, always associated with some place or position.

Haraway subscribes to the constructivist critique of disembodied scientific objectivity and adds that it is an example of the “god trick” in which objectivity is a view “from above” or “from nowhere,” from outside the field of particular positions so that the scientist is distanced from the object of research. The point of view — of a human, any living being, or a machine — is an allegory for feminist objectivity. But in contrast to positioning approaches, the objectivity promised does not consist in identification with another position, but rather in a partial connection: to see together with the other, without claiming to be other. Situated knowledge from a partial perspective does not monopolize the truth by ontologizing subjugation but instead opens a way to learn how others see. Thus, only a partial perspective combined with others of the same kind can guarantee objectivity and accountability. However, the shared conversation on which rational knowledge is based should not be limited only to human beings. Any object of knowledge, Haraway argues, even when mediated by technologies for visualization, has agency, is active and is a generative node for meaning. The idea of material-semiotic actors whose boundaries are materialized in social interactions is introduced to conceptualize this kind of agency.